

SALUTE TO... NAVAL BRANCH HEALTH CLINIC GULFPORT

"Sailor Readiness + Family Readiness = Mission Readiness" summarizes the formula for the mental health professionals and leadership of the Naval Branch Health Clinic (BHC) aboard Naval Construction Battalion Center, Gulfport, Mississippi.

The BHC Gulfport serves a highly deployed military population. Naval Construction Battalion Center Gulfport is a Fleet concentration area for Sea Bees; one of only two homeport locations for operational battalions. It also serves as one of two mobilization processing sites for all active and reserve component Sea Bees, processing between 5000 and 6000 individuals in FY07. BHC Gulfport and its Mental Health Department have had to "think out of the box" in order to meet the exponential growth in mental health demand in response to increased OPTEMPO and mobilization, the aftermath of three hurricanes (Ivan, Katrina, Rita), and a 50% decrease in psychiatry and mental health services in the post-hurricane Gulfport area.



In a unique collaborative effort, BHC and Fleet and Family Service Center (FFSC) have teamed up to offer pre and post deployment mental health care services for Gulfport-based Naval Mobile Construction Battalions, multi-service military student populations, Pascagoula-based Pre-Commissioning Unit crews, various units from New Orleans, and personnel mobilizing or demobilizing through Navy Mobilization Processing Site (NMPS) Gulfport. Additionally, the two organizations have partnered to help families better cope with the separation experienced as parents and spouses deploy.

Using the Soldiers and Families Assistance Center model Naval Hospital Commanding Officer, CAPT Kevin Berry helped develop and implement while serving at Tripler Army Medical Center, Hawaii, the BHC Officer in Charge, in collaboration with his reserve recalled clinical psychiatrist and FFSC Director, developed a community based support and mental health program. This program attempts to reduce stigma and increase access by combining the multiple mental health disciplines available in the Gulfport area to manage the stress and burden placed on military members and their families. This unique integration of disciplines and services ensures military members and their family members receive enhanced mental health care and support services before, during, and after deployment, in a coordinated and seamless process. As the program developed, a bi-directional referral pattern that provides for information exchange between FFSC and the BHC Mental Health Department was instituted. This ensures that members receive precisely the resources they need, provides continuity of care, and eliminates the need for patients to seek care through multiple systems or access points. Weekly meetings between the FFSC and BHC facilitate information exchange which facilitates appropriateness of care and resource availability through the member's changing needs.

The Gulfport team also provides every deploying and returning service member with a face to face interview and health screening with either a psychiatric technician or social worker, with direct referral access to a psychiatrist or psychologist for any necessary follow up. The purpose of the screening is to uncover any need for medical and mental health intervention, suitability for deployment assignment, injury from recent deployment, including head traumas, review of pharmaceutical prescriptions and medical management, etc... Further, since everyone receives a mental health interview, any stigma is greatly reduced, and an additional avenue is opened for people to avail themselves to mental health professionals. This mental health intervention increases mission readiness and ability to perform in the field, and also has proven to be very useful in providing services to returning individuals.

During an April 2007 area visit, the Naval Inspector General recognized this community based approach for Sea Bees and their families as a best practice. The innovation, collaboration, and commitment to medical readiness demonstrated by BHC Gulfport and its Mental Health Department emulates the vision of Naval Hospital Pensacola and its branch health clinics - "Exceed Expectations Everyday".